

Hypnosis and the Mind

Facts and Fallacies

by Dean Winter



Many people have tried to define just what hypnosis is, most with only a limited degree of success. For something that is so obviously able to tap quite profound areas of our minds it is both remarkably simple and remarkably elusive.

The definitions I have heard range from the standard "it's a state of deep relaxation" and "an inward focus of attention" through "a putting aside of the critical faculty" and "misdirected attention plus belief plus expectation" to "there is no such thing as hypnosis" and "all communication is hypnosis".

Milton Erickson, a modern day master of hypnosis, defined it as: "The induction of special states of awareness, circumscribed in character, not easily intruded upon, and dependent upon the subject's own total experiential life, as selected by the subject and controlled and directed by the hypnotist." And this man was a master of words! No wonder they say "it's a bit like sleep". It's not really, except to the outside observer.

So just what is it? Easy to do; difficult to talk about. One of the facts about the mind is that to relax it, it is not necessary to think of *nothing*, which is actually very difficult to do (just ask any meditator). Instead, the mind will relax when you think of just *one* thing.

So concentration (not the forceful energetic type) or focusing of the mind upon one thing, be it object or idea, plus relaxation of the physical body gives hypnosis.

Hallucination

An example of the incongruities and difficulties in defining hypnosis is the phenomenon known as *negative hallucination*, or not seeing something that is there (as compared to *positive hallucination* - seeing something that is not there). Now *negative hallucination* is supposed to be one of the test criteria for assessing the depth of a trance, and is in fact an indication of a quite deep state of hypnosis.

Have you ever tried to go out somewhere, and no matter how many times you search the house, top to bottom, looking in places no human has ever eyeballed before, you still can't find the car keys, only to have them turn up an hour later in the middle of the table you are absolutely certain you searched thoroughly at least six times? This is an example of *negative hallucination* and if it hasn't happened to you, it's pretty common. *This means, by all reliable criteria, that you were in a deep state of hypnosis at the time. It didn't feel like it, did it?*

So, what is hypnosis? Basically, we don't know. We know how to do it, but not really what it is. It does seem that one of the main activities of our conscious mind is the critical faculty - that is, the ability to evaluate information, weigh it up, check it for flaws and compare it to our past experiences. And it is this quality of our mind that we put aside when we go into hypnosis.

Consciousness

Another of the functions or roles of the conscious mind, it seems, is to keep informa-

tion out. Consciousness would appear to be a very selective filter - somewhat like an iris - that just opens a bit every now and then and if you are around at the right time and have information with the right key you can get in.

Although I use the words conscious, subconscious and unconscious, I feel these terms are misleading. They seem to imply that there are two (or even three) separate minds with the other-than-conscious ones being full of nasties, remote, unknown and maybe better left alone. And it almost leads to thoughts like; "I wonder if I can have it surgically removed, I'm doing fine without it anyway." I prefer to consider the mind, wonderful organ that it is, as being one single thing. After all, if we have more than one mind, I wonder where we left the others!

Consciousness I imagine as a sort of internal torch in the warehouse of our emotions and memory banks. Whatever the torch is shining upon is what we are thinking of at the time. If you want to think of something else, move the torch.

Now in this cavern of mazes, there are, as you'd expect, areas we don't go to and areas we only visit occasionally. It doesn't mean we can't, only that we don't. Maybe we've lost the map or forgotten how to get there, or maybe we are afraid of something there and so avoid it - a bit like Redfern station at night.

Memory

Nevertheless, we can (with proper guidance, encouragement or desire) recover any and every experience or memory we've ever had. But you won't find them by wandering around on the tracks you've worn in the carpet in the foyer of your mind. Those cupboards only contain the programmes, lollies and the fire extinguisher, as you already know.

Another problem with understanding hypnosis is the modern urban myth that hypnosis is like that practised by *Mandrake the Magician* or what *Obi-wan Kenobi* did to the trainee *Darth Vader* in *Star Wars*.

While I don't rule out the possibility of this level of magical influence existing, I don't think it could be considered hypnosis as practised today except in the loosest of definitions.

Actually I'll partially retract these last two paragraphs and say that good and profound hypnosis relies at least in part on the

ability of the hypnotist to weave a spell that the hypnotee believes and can enter.

Another myth, or maybe fear, is that when you are "under" hypnosis you are somewhat absent, that your mind has gone away. This is just not true. That is known as *being dead*. If anything, you are *more* aware of what is going on around you than normal, only you just don't care.

Also if the hypnotist should up and die, as if to spite you just after guiding you into a trance, you wouldn't be locked up there forever. You'd either bring yourself out when you realised he'd been pretty quiet for a while, or you'd go to sleep and awake when you weren't tired any more, just as you always do in the morning.

This is due to the fact that all a hypnotist actually does is talk you into doing things to yourself. In a very real sense there is no such thing as hetero-hypnosis (or "hypnosis"), only self-hypnosis. The best way to learn self hypnosis is to be hypnotised a number of times; not only because the hypnotist knows how to do it and you don't, but also because it frees you to focus all your attention on the object at hand and the hypnotist remembers where you are, what to do next, what you are

going to do when you get there - and what the time is.

Affirmations

One great use for hypnosis is *affirmations*, so let's look at them. First they need to be clearly and simply worded, as we understand better at a deeper level if information is presented simply. Next, they need to be positive in nature because our brains can't actually cope with negatives.

To think of *not x* we first immediately think of *x* and all we end up doing is affirming what we don't want. Hence an affirmation of "*I am going to stop smoking*" is probably more damaging than helpful. "*I am going to breathe freely and easily*" or even "*I am going to be \$15 a week richer*" is much more likely to result in quitting.

Once you're clear about what you want and can express it, sit somewhere comfortable and quiet where you won't be disturbed, maybe unplug the phone. Put your attention inside yourself, e.g., pay attention to your breathing, or feel the muscle tone in your body. Take a few deep breaths and exhale slowly, while relaxing your body as much as possible.

It's often helpful to imagine being somewhere very peaceful and calm, such as lying on the sand at a beautiful deserted beach, enjoying the feeling of the sun gently warming your skin with the slow and rhythmic sound of the waves washing up the beach, hissing as it disappears into the sand and - hey, come back here!

Use the beach if you like - or anywhere else. When you are fully relaxed, recite your affirmation with as much conviction as you can put into it without strain; e.g., "*I am an intelligent and valuable human being*" and really believe it, mean it, go "yeah" to yourself. Keep relaxing and affirming and do this for as long as you like. Twenty minutes is excellent.

When you've had enough and feel that your affirmation really is true, prepare to come out of the trance. This is quite easy. Just start thinking that you are going to get up soon. Anticipate feeling awake and refreshed. It may be helpful to decide to count to five and when you get to five you'll feel fully awake. Count to five, awake and stretch. Although this is something you can do on your own, you can achieve much greater depths with the aid of someone experienced. ∞